

ANOTHER SITE OF GLOBALIZATION: “WOMAN” AS SYMBOL OF NATION AND DIASPORA IN *MARTÍN (HACHE)*

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Feminist geographer Gillian Rose has argued that humanistic geography longs for a prediscursive space that it associates with the mother, and that "place is represented as Woman, in order that humanists can define their own masculine rationality."² This geographical metaphor of the female body as place—of home, nation, exile, and diaspora-- is as good a place to start as any in a discussion of how women function symbolically in the 1997 film, *Martín (Hache)*.³ As an Argentine/Spanish co-production, directed by the Argentinean director Adolfo Aristarain, *Martín (Hache)* is, among other things, a cinematic meditation on exile and diaspora. For clarity, I define *exile* as the subject's forced separation from the homeland, usually for political reasons, and *diaspora* as the state of being outside the homeland for reasons that are not, or are no longer juridical. The Argentina exile and diaspora I discuss in relation to *Martín (Hache)* refer to the period of forced absence during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983, and the circumstances of continued absence after democracy was restored.

Martín (Hache) is centrally about its male characters: Martín Echenique is an emotionally repressed Argentine film maker living in Spain, and his 19 year old son and namesake—the eponymous Martín (Hache, for “hijo”) is struggling to find himself. Martín senior's best friend Dante, a gay Spanish actor, rounds out the trio. Although I will come back to the rather open-minded way Aristarain deploys queer sexuality in the film, the primary matter of concern in this paper is the movie's very conventional gender arrangements, including the centering of subjectivity in the male characters and the deployment of the feminine on the terrain of the symbolic.

Women are available to take on symbolic functions in this—and any other--film because gender, as both an *identity* for individuals and a *structuring device* within culture, is conventionally presumed to be unchanging. This sense of stability is reinforced by the fact that gender identity is rarely challenged with the move from one

¹ University of Minnesota.

²Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 56.

³Adolfo Aristarain (Director), *Martín (Hache)*, Alta Films (Spain), AVH and Líder Films (Argentina), 1997.

nation to another. However, what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviour often varies from culture to culture, and the displacement of exile often makes it difficult for men, especially, to perform their gender successfully.⁴ Gender as *structure* relies on the continual performance of gender difference to maintain the appearance of a meaningful and predictable dichotomy⁵ The metaphor of mother as homeland, for example, is repeated to the point of banality in male-authored exile literature, with the important consequence of making it seem natural.

The film's two key women characters, Alicia, Martín's mistress, and Liliana, his former wife, represent exile and home, respectively, in the film. Alicia is the female lead in conventional cinematic terms, even though one could argue that the sexual other against whom Martín plays is his gay friend, Dante. Liliana, on the other hand, is a minor character with little screen time. Nevertheless, they complement each other in an updated version of the familiar Madonna/whore dichotomy at the same time that they represent the stability of home and the chaos of exile.

Whereas the two male characters, Martín and his son, *suffer* exile and diaspora, the two female characters *embody* nation on the one hand and uprootedness on the other. Woman, especially as mother, serves as a metaphor for the nation that gives symbolic birth to the ideally male citizen. Then, like the Freudian, phallic mother whose power is ungraspable, and for whom the son's desire is both inevitable and illicit, she ejects him from her midst. This act takes place twice in the narrative. The first time, on the symbolic level and off-screen, years ago, Martín senior, together with his family, was, it is suggested, forced to leave Argentina by the all-powerful symbolic father, the military dictatorship, which, having taken possession of the mother-nation, forces the

⁴ Moreover, men who are stripped of professional credentials, cannot support their families, are made dependent on the state, or face changing power relations within the family may have their sense of their own masculinity challenged. Women moving from traditional societies to post-industrial nations may have greater opportunities open to them. What constitutes the performance and incessant production of gender is likely different from the homeland to the host country. Though it is not universal, the tendency is for men not to be able to live out hegemonic masculinity. Women often find it difficult to return home to a more limited range of opportunities. (A handbook for Latin Americans in Sweden considering return after the end of the dictatorships contains a chapter on women's challenges on return in this regard [Marta Inostroza and Gustavo Ramírez, *Exilio y retorno* (Stockholm: ABF, 1986)].) In the gendered dyads that structure the western imaginary, the exile, as a subject, occupies the masculine position of child in the process of separation, while the feminine position is the maternal place left behind.

⁵ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

child of the nation out. This ejection is repeated in the next generation, when Hache's mother compels him to leave her home.

The mother/nation, with its patriarchal, familial, domestic structure that must make and police its own boundaries in order to survive, draws those boundaries to exclude the child of excess. As a result, Hache is effaced both by his father and his mother. Thrown out of the mother's home, and compelled to leave the motherland, in perhaps the most familiar trope of male-authored exile writing, he is expected to enter the land of the father, the land of exile that is also the land of Argentina's ancestral, colonial past. But Hache's father gives him no room. In one, perhaps unnecessarily explanatory, speech, Alicia makes this clear: Hache's name is not only a letter but a silent letter, the marker for nothingness. His real given name, Martín, remains the name of the father, and the son cannot live up to his father's expectations of him.

Martín senior is the quintessential diasporic subject as I understand it: no longer forcibly kept out of his homeland, he is nevertheless unable to return. Damaged by Argentina (in a conversation with Hache he talks explicitly about how Argentina destroys people), Spain is never fully home to him. Although he is a successful film maker he has been unproductive for many years, and now that he has written a new screenplay he is unwilling to direct it himself. It is this brokenness that characterizes Martín. Exile, and then diaspora, have enabled Martín to become financially successful, but they have crippled him emotionally.

Unlike her husband, who made a career and a life in Spain that he is loath to abandon, Hache's mother decided to return to Argentina after the military dictatorship ended. She has remarried and has a new child; this new family cements her reintegration into Argentine society. We know nothing of her life in exile; the very blankness of her individual history is, literally, the filmmaker's *carte blanche* –an empty page onto which the familiar, traditional myths of woman as mother, and of mother as nation, are written. With no story of her own beyond the story of domesticity, she is the placeholder for the role of the bearer of the home culture. Whereas many real-life women found new opportunities open to them when they left their homelands under the duress of military dictatorship, male-authored stories written about exile inevitably link the homeland to the mother, focusing not on the life of the woman who represents home, but on the son who is forced to leave her and the nation with whom she is conflated. In most of these texts the mother remains in the space of the nation she represents; in *Martín (Hache)* she has returned to it as soon as it was possible.⁶

⁶ Here is a real gender difference in exile writing: women writing about exile do not use this trope; their protagonists are as likely to be women as men, and the women have their own issues to deal with. Women exile (and diasporic) writers themselves tend not to confuse the

Her life in exile a blank, Hache's mother only begins to have a story of her own when she can resume her traditional connection with the homeland. By remarrying, to a physician, a healer himself, and having a new baby, she performs in microcosm the remaking of the nation in the domestic space of the home. As if to underscore the role of women in this project, and the derision to which embracing this national domesticity opens them, Hache's sister, who also went back to Argentina with her mother, is described as not doing anything much with her life: She has married and is having children. Hache and his father understand this life as neither good nor bad, but as a kind of nullity, not a choice at all, but rather determined by nature and the result of inertia. It is certainly no achievement. Within the world-view of the film, domesticity is the only option for women in the homeland, but they are scorned for it.

Hache represents a disruption and a threat in his mother's new home. He carries his father's name and is the living proof of his mother's former life, the evidence of a previous sexual relationship, and testimony to a life outside of Argentina. She wants nothing more than to be rid of him. With a new baby in a small apartment, she needs the space he has occupied; he is already sleeping on the couch, while his new stepsister occupies his old room. His place will be taken by the new child of the new family, fully Argentine and not sullied by exile.

As the reconstituted mother of the newly redemocratized, but still fragile nation, Hache's mother represents half of the familiar Madonna/whore dichotomy of femininity, but with a difference. Within the film, and in this modern age, the Madonna figure is no longer glorified and idealized. This is not the mother who ferociously protects her children, or who sacrifices her own happiness for them. Her choice—to devote herself to domesticity, and, symbolically, to remake the nation—is both demeaned and implicitly criticized in the film. Disdainful of her current husband, offering to have sex with his predecessor, Martín, she is cognizant of her selfishness. She is, above all, not willing to risk her hard-won middle-class lifestyle for anyone, and especially not for her son.

Liliana's small apartment, her new baby, and the precarious middle-class life onto which she is holding with all her strength, are set against the luxury of the living and

maternal body with the lost homeland. References to the mother are rare in their work, and when they do occur, they avoid the infantile representation of the mother who exists solely in relation to the child. For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Amy Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). In *Martín (Hache)*, in contrast, it is as if the mother never stopped being the site of the nation, whose responsibility it was to bear the culture for the men in her family and transmit it to the next generation,

working spaces that she left behind in Spain. The small rooms, filled with family, of the Buenos Aires apartment contrast with the open and unlived-in feeling of Martín's flat, and the lively dinner conversation at her table contrast with Martín's smoking marijuana and using headphones to listen to music, which cuts off any communication with the outside. Although Martín's home is empty of emotional warmth, the domestic spaces of the mother's Buenos Aires apartment are not portrayed as a particularly desirable alternative. He is not to be interrupted; for any privacy at all, she must go into the kitchen.

The mother's counterpart in the film's Madonna/whore binary is Martín's lover, Alicia. Whereas Hache's mother represents control and return to the order of the nation within the confines of marriage, Alicia is the visual symbol of chaos. Her blond hair is always wild, her cocaine use is out of control, her clothing is skimpy, and she is emotionally volatile and vulnerable. Much younger than Martín, Alicia left Argentina not for political or even economic reasons, but because she fell in love with a Spaniard when they were working together on an Argentine/Spanish co-production, and she followed him to Madrid. Their relationship soon ended, and she took up with Martín, to whom she is, apparently, in sexual thrall. (This, by the way, seems to me like a familiar male fantasy in the movies: the young sexy woman who adores a much older man, particularly telling in this film, given that Arístarain, like Martín senior, is a Porteño-born film maker living in Madrid.)

Martín's mother is calculating; Alicia is impulsive. The mother contains her emotions and deliberately strives to create a stable life for herself and her new family; Alicia is emotionally expressive and self-destructive. Martín's mother wants to get rid of her son and foist him on his father; Alicia wants to become Hache's mother and envelop him with love. Alicia's most unsettling moment comes when she kisses Hache and tells him she wants him to be her lover. Her suicide follows this moment of horrified realization that she has transgressed the boundaries of the incest taboo and the distinction between mother and lover, Madonna and whore, itself.

With a mother selfish enough to send her fragile son away to his emotionally distant father set in contrast to a sexually wanton woman who is warm, generous, loving, and vulnerable, Arístarain updates the Madonna/whore dichotomy. The "whore" is to be pitied rather than vilified, and the Madonna is far from divine. Nevertheless, the dichotomy retains its power as an organizing structure, within which the male characters exercise their subjectivity.

There is nothing particularly surprising in this familiar deployment of the feminine in figuring the ground on which masculine subjectivity plays out its dramas; on the contrary, what makes the process work is that it has attained the status of cultural

myth. What is surprising is that the ideology of heterosexuality that underlies these gendered arrangements (the illicit, chaotic extramarital relationship as well as the contained and channeled reproductive sexuality of the family), is itself called into question in the film. I have argued at length elsewhere that Dante, the gay male character, occupies the moral center of the film; and that his queer sexuality marks the real queerness of the film: the displacement, non-belonging, emotional sterility or excess, and lack of direction of the diasporic characters.⁷ Given the sensitive and positive treatment of the queer figure in the film, one might have expected a more nuanced treatment of the female figures. This is not to suggest that Alicia is not a sympathetic character, or that she is depicted as unintelligent or bereft of any inner life. But Martín repeatedly belittles her, refuses to acknowledge her insights, and treats her like an object. From the point of view of the (admittedly emotionally crippled) protagonist, Alicia's presence in the world is a function of his need for her.

Whereas the familiar militant heterosexuality as bedrock of moral and civic stability is absent in the film, the codes of gender remain firmly in place. The feminine remains the material out of which the male diasporic subject tries to make sense of his life, but this can happen only when the female characters are killed off, in actuality as is the case with Alicia, and symbolically in the case of Liliana.⁹ In the end, Hache goes back to Argentina, returning to a homeland that is not his mother's house, but rather to an uncertain but independent future.

⁷ I make this argument in "The Queer Cartographies of *Martín (Hache)*: A Spanish/Argentine Co-Production," an unpublished paper presented at LASA 2006.

⁹ A similar dynamic underlies the male coming of age story, *Y tu mamá también* (Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Mexico, Alianza Films, et. al., 2001), in which the young male protagonists learn about their own sexuality (and the problems of their nation) but the twenty-something older woman who leads them on their journey dies of cancer. In that film, however, the young protagonists are shocked and terrified to discover the homosexual desire that subtends their camaraderie.